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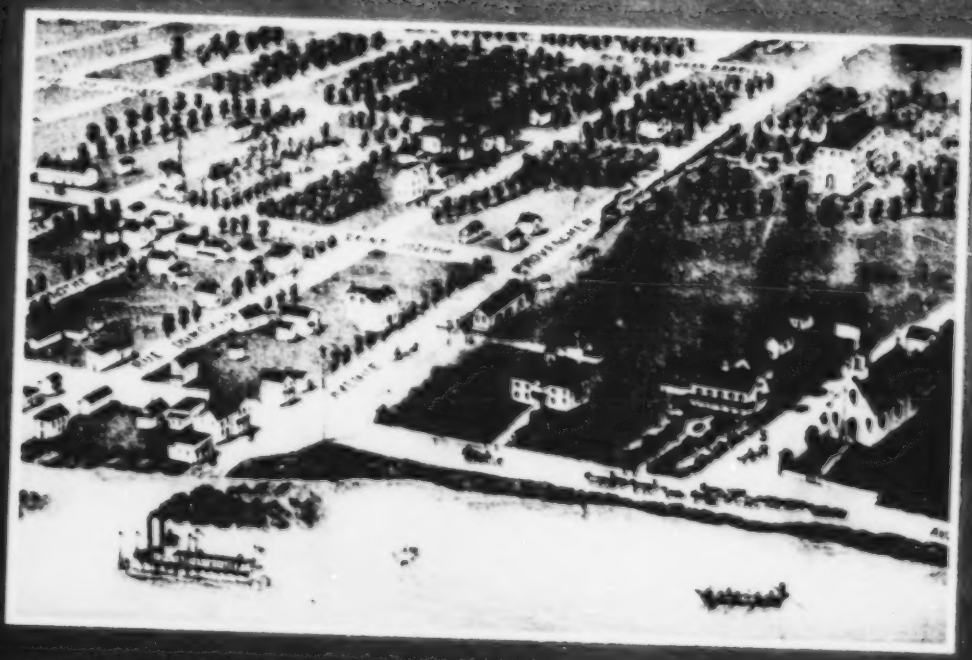
ST. BONIFACE



88-04511/

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data
Main entry under title:
St. Boniface
Cover title.
Published also in French under the title:
Saint-Boniface.
ISBN 0-7711-0117-1
1. St. Boniface (Winnipeg, Man.)—History.
I. Manitoba. Historic Resources Branch.
FC3399.S24S24 1988 971.27'4 C86-099306-X
F1064.5.S13S24 1988

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ST. BONIFACE

St. Boniface, Winnipeg's colourful and historic French-speaking enclave, is perhaps the pre-eminent geographic focal point of francophone cultural life in Manitoba. It lends its name and provides a home to several well-established institutions—including a cathedral, a college, and a hospital—which are central to the *franco-manitobain* community's consciousness of itself as a distinct entity.

St. Boniface was incorporated as a town in 1883, as a city in 1908, and formally became part of the City of Winnipeg in 1971. But despite municipal reorganization, and the related pressures of urban industrial development, modern day St. Boniface retains a special, vibrant character which is cherished by many Manitobans, francophone and non-francophone alike. This owes much to the early history of St. Boniface, which is celebrated enthusiastically each February when the Festival du Voyageur helps dispel the late-winter doldrums of thousands of Manitobans and out-of-town visitors.

As the festival's voyageur theme acknowledges, the origins of St. Boniface lie in the fur trade of the late 1700s and early 1800s, when numerous French Canadians chose to settle in the Northwest with their Indian wives rather than return to Quebec after completing their fur trade careers. Subsequently, during the Selkirk Settlement era and beyond, Roman Catholic missions and the changing circumstances of North American fur trade activity provided further impetus to the emergence of St. Boniface as a distinct settlement.

The St. Boniface civic crest.
Courtesy Manitoba Archives

St. Boniface Origins

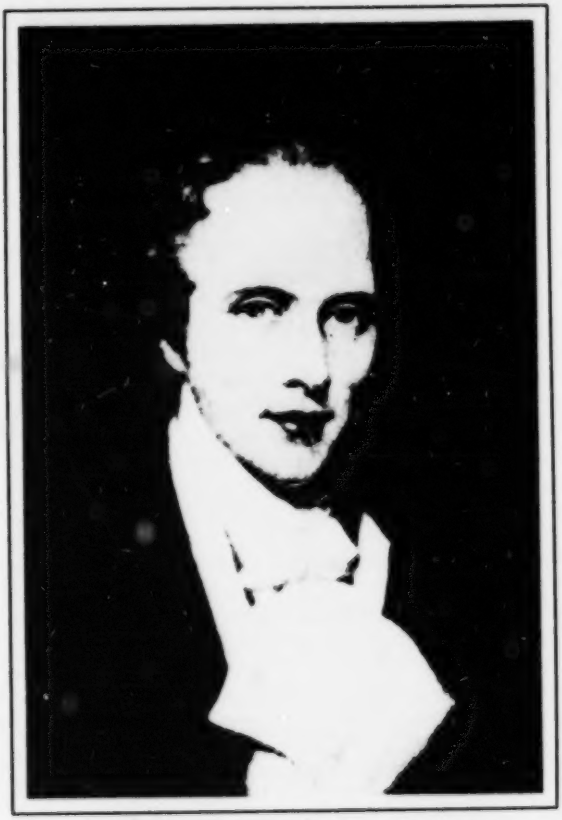
Commencing in the 1780s, the Red River Valley became home to an increasing number of British and Quebec-born fur trade workers who remained after completing terms of employment manning canoe brigades and serving at remote outposts in the western interior. Most of these retired fur trade personnel had wed Indian wives and fathered mixed-blood children. They independently supported these families by providing short-term services to their former employers, notably in hunting the buffalo herds which provided the fur trade's pemmican supply. By the early 1800s, the freemen, their Indian wives and in-laws, Métis progeny, and co-workers at fur trade outposts comprised an elaborate multicultural society whose fortunes were intricately bound to those of the fur trade itself.

This unique society in the western interior soon grew divided when rivalry between the North West Company (NWCo) and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) assumed an unprecedented new form in 1812. In that year, the Scots philanthropist and HBC shareholder Thomas Douglas, fifth Earl of Selkirk, spearheaded the launching of a Company-sponsored agricultural colony near the forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers. In part, this project was intended to curb the HBC's costly dependence upon provisions imported from the British Isles, and to provide a surplus labour pool to be drawn upon as needed. As such, the project had serious implications for earlier inhabitants of the region, who were concentrated to the south on the bison-rich prairie around Pembina, and who subsisted by supplying the fur trade with pemmican and intermittent, short-term labour.

It was widely feared that the Selkirk colonists would disperse the great buffalo herds upon which the pemmican trade depended. Ironically, during its initial period, the colony itself heavily depended upon the availability of pemmican, for Red River pioneer agriculture was uncertain in the extreme. However, the NWCo actively exploited the fears of the freemen and Métis by intimating further that colonization would run roughshod over their concerns about their rights to occupy land. These tensions helped estrange the freemen and Métis in a manner that often cut across even the bonds of kinship and clan loyalties. Some assisted the NWCo in its ensuing 1813-17 war of intimidation against the colony. Others, choosing to remain neutral, simply quit the region pending a resolution of the conflict. A third group made common cause with the embattled colonists, supplying them with food and other aid despite the at times lethal risks involved.

The most famous member of the latter group was the Quebec-born freeman Jean-Baptiste Lagimonière (also known to his contemporaries as "Lagimodière"). He and his wife, the former Marie-Anne Gaboury, in 1806-07 became the first non-aboriginal couple in western British North America when they wintered at the junction of the Red and Pembina rivers. They recently had married in Quebec, where Lagimonière returned briefly following a five year stint as a voyageur. The couple moved to the forks of the Red and the Assiniboine when they learned in 1812 that Lord Selkirk planned to establish his agricultural colony there. During 1815-16, Lagimonière made his epic trek to the Earl's Montreal headquarters with urgent dispatches concerning the plight of the Red River colonists. The Nor'Westers captured Lagimonière as he returned west with the Earl's message that help was on the way.

In June 1817, Lord Selkirk himself arrived at Red River leading a column of armed mercenaries, collectively known as the "de Meurons". These men—chiefly Swiss and German soldiers of fortune recruited from two mercenary regiments under Swiss officers—had fought along with British troops and were undergoing demobilization in the wake of wars in Napoleonic Europe and in North America.



Thomas Douglas, Fifth Earl of Selkirk
Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Lord Selkirk rewarded Lagimonière with a grant of land near the mouth of the Seine River, where the former voyageur gratefully settled down to raise a family with his wife. Nearby, along the Seine's west bank, Selkirk dispensed river lots and other inducements to those among his mercenaries who were willing to remain in the colony as settler-soldiers. Selkirk even then apparently had earmarked other lands in the vicinity for a quite different sort of use. These lands were to serve as the *pied-à-terre* for future French-speaking settlers, and for a Roman Catholic mission destined to encompass vast areas to the far west, while playing an incalculably important role in establishing and nurturing the future community of St. Boniface.

At the time, Selkirk and some of his associates eagerly hoped that the introduction to the colony of Roman Catholic clergy would exert a pacific, stabilizing influence within the embattled settlement. During the Earl's visit in the summer of 1817, he circulated a petition signed by sixteen Canadiens, four de Meurons, and three Scots which was forwarded to his Montreal attorney, Samuel Gale, to aid in securing a Catholic priest for Red River. But as was true of so many other endeavours associated with the Selkirk colony, this turning point could not be reached without setbacks. The 1817 petition itself arose from earlier difficulties which it was intended to redress.

As early as 1814, the colony's first governor, Miles Macdonell, wrote from Pembina to warn that the settlement's future prospects depended upon the Selkirk's ability to "wean" about 200 district Métis and freemen from their "Indian way of life". Macdonell thought that the best chance of accomplishing this lay in securing "a good priest that spoke French," who might be relied upon to shepherd the freemen and Métis into "a regular mode of life"—specifically, tenant farming.

Macdonell's plan essentially envisioned the supplanting of the Nor'Westers—in his view the only authority respected and obeyed by freemen and Métis—by the moral authority of the Catholic Church. The governor struck this note in the spring of 1816 when he wrote to Joseph Octave Plessis, Bishop of Quebec, to ask that a missionary be dispatched to minister to the settlement's Irish and Scottish Catholics, as well as the "hundreds of free Canadians wandering about our colony." At the time, Bishop Plessis had plans of his own to send two missionaries as far west as Rainy Lake, subject to NWCo assistance. Instead, Macdonell and Selkirk persuaded him that Rainy Lake could be served from a Red River mission, and they undertook to provide the necessary transportation.

Bishop Plessis directed Father Pierre Tabeau to proceed to Red River. Once arrived at Rainy River, Tabeau learned that the Selkirk colonists had been dispersed following the skirmish at Seven Oaks in which Governor Robert Semple, Macdonell's successor, and twenty colonists were killed by Métis horsemen. Tabeau suggested to his bishop that the proposed Red River mission would be futile, given the explosive collision of rival fur trade interests in the interior. However, the subsequent 1817 petition tendered by Selkirk colonists apparently prompted Bishop Plessis to accede to the Earl's wishes. On 11 February 1818, Plessis advised Gale, the Montreal lawyer, that he planned to select two priests and entrust them with the Catholic mission to Red River.

The bishop selected three men who tackled the formidable task of ministering to the volatile and divided communities along the Red. Fathers Joseph Norbert Provencher (empowered as vicar general) and Sévère Dumoulin, along with the seminarian Guillaume (William) Edge left Montreal on 19 May 1818 and arrived at Red River in mid-July. Although the clerics were scrutinized curiously by some who had never before seen churchmen of any denomination, they were welcomed heartily by others.

Bishop Plessis' instructions stipulated that the missionaries were to "raise from barbarism" the natives of the area, baptise the freemen's Indian wives and solemnize their marriages, educate the children, and accustom local Catholics to the idea that the Church demands peace, docility, and obedience both to itself and to the State. Bishop Plessis also had asked that the new mission be located near Fort Douglas, and that it include a church, a residence, and a school. Selkirk, for his part, endowed the new mission with the proceeds of a subscription campaign Gale had mounted to solicit financial contributions, and more important, with a grant of more than fifty square kilometres on the Seine's east bank, as well as a 300 metre river lot along the east bank of the Red. After the three clerics arrived at Red River, work was promptly begun upon a residence and chapel, although the resulting nine metre by fifteen metre building was not completed for several years, and was later damaged severely in the disastrous May 1826 flood. The original log-construction building stood near the present site of St. Boniface Cathedral on the Red River's east bank.

Provencher and his fellow missionaries commenced their pioneer ministries by preparing the children and Native wives of *Canadiens* to receive the rite of baptism. Marie-Anne Lagimonière—one of the few French-speaking women in the colony already baptised—acted as godmother to the neophytes.

A.A. Garnier's monument to Provencher, erected in St. Boniface Cathedral cemetery.
Courtesy Manitoba Archives

At the time of the priests' arrival in 1818, the population of the colony itself stood at only 419, whereas nearly 500 people resided at Pembina. Provencher soon took stock of this situation, and recognized that the southern district was the preferred locus of freemen, Métis, *and* new immigrants from Lower Canada and the Northwest. He was given an object lesson regarding this situation within a month of reaching Red River, and it prompted to him to separate his mission into two components shortly afterward.

That first summer, about fifty French Canadians, including women and children, followed the priests from Montreal. Lord Selkirk had hoped they would prove model agricultural colonists, and furnish an example of diligence and sedentary habits to the Métis and freemen. But once again, Selkirk's hopes were to founder on the harsh realities encountered by his pioneer agrarians.

The newcomers from Quebec arrived just in time to witness the aftermath of a prairie locust infestation. They abruptly hastened southward to join their compatriots around Pembina. Far from installing in the Métis and freemen sedentary habits rooted in rural Quebec, members of the contingent soon learned from their new neighbours the skills necessary to share in the proceeds of the buffalo hunt. Their prudence in doing so cannot be doubted—like their predecessors around Pembina who had begun to congregate in the area a few decades earlier, the French Canadians benefitted from a more abundant stock of bison than did Selkirk's colonists to the north. These developments reinforced Pembina's predominance as a centre for French-speaking settlement which, until the 1820s, virtually eclipsed the struggling community along the Red and Seine rivers from which St. Boniface would emerge.

Meanwhile, Father Provencher acknowledged the allure of Pembina by dispatching Dumoulin and Edge to launch a second mission in Assiniboia. Receptive inhabitants at Pembina helped the clerics create a thriving mission and a well-attended school. Provencher was bound by Church obligations toward the Selkirk interests to maintain a presence in the colony itself. On All Saints' Day (1 November), 1818, he opened his own mission in uncompleted facilities at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine, consecrating it to the protection of St. Boniface. Shortly thereafter, St. François Xavier became the patron saint of the Dumoulin-Edge mission at Pembina.

During the next few years, the Pembina mission's rapid progress contrasted sharply with the more gradual development of the St. Boniface mission. However, following Selkirk's death in 1820, a five year period opened which proved pivotal in reversing this situation. The eclipse of Pembina and the rise of St. Boniface during this period resulted from developments within the fur trade, and the actions of Provencher, who was elevated to the rank of coadjutor Bishop for the Northwest in May 1822.

The Merger—and the Emergence of St. Boniface: 1821-30

Events that decisively turned the tide of settlement in favour of St. Boniface during the early 1820s followed from the dramatic fur trade merger of 1821, whereby the Hudson's Bay Company swallowed up the operations and many of the personnel of its bitter rival, the NWCo. The merger heralded an end to a fur trade war which twice had forced the dispersal of the Selkirk colonists. Also, it resulted in the reorganization of the HBC's operations. This process throughout the 1820s resulted in a steady stream of new settlers, for the HBC dispensed outright with the services of fur trade employees, and encouraged others to retire early. Many of these new settlers had been members of labour force bequeathed to the HBC by the Nor'Westers, and included a substantial contingent of French-speaking employees.

Apprehensive about the prospect that its cast-off former employees would return to haunt the HBC monopoly as freemen well-schooled in the fur trade, Company officials strenuously encouraged all those who wished to remain in the Northwest to settle at Red River. Transportation, land, and other inducements were offered by the Company to encourage this. As the majority of the new settlers were *Canadiens* and Métis, Provencher's St. Boniface congregation grew considerably throughout the 1820s as former fur trade personnel took up lots along the Red River south of his mission. As early as 1825, it was said that settlement along the Red extended as far south as the La Salle River (originally known as *la rivière Sale*).

The newcomers, like their forerunners, probably would have chosen Pembina if they had had the choice. However, the post-merger period also witnessed the involuntary relocation of the Pembina population, and it was this event that decisively established St. Boniface as the hub of Catholic settlement and cultural life during this period and for many years to come.

A view of the Red River's historic east bank near St. Boniface Cathedral in 1909.
Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Selkirk colony administrators during the early 1820s cast an anxious eye on Pembina, finding it a distinct liability on several counts. They objected to the dual geographic focus of French-speaking Catholic settlement in the Northwest on the grounds that this arrangement weakened the colony as a whole. By that time, it was known that Pembina actually lay south of the International Boundary which had been demarcated at the 49th parallel in 1818. Colony administrators—who increasingly became indistinguishable from the HBC officialdom—feared that Pembina would expose the Company monopoly to American incursions. The continued existence of Pembina also served as a magnet to those who were dissatisfied with life at the Forks. Moreover, administrators feared that Pembina might become a flash point for hostilities with the Sioux Indians, which might escalate into an all-out attack on the colony itself.

The result of these considerations was the decision to uproot—literally—the Pembina community. Colony administrators dismantled the local HBC trading post, along with Fort Daer, and floated the pieces downriver to the Forks. As intended, this move could not but clinch the colony's status as the principal marketplace for provisions, thus undermining a major reason for Pembina's existence. Meanwhile, Bishop Provencher complied, albeit reluctantly, with pressures to close Dumoulin's Pembina mission and school. Disappointed and perhaps embittered, Father Dumoulin returned to Lower Canada.

Meanwhile, the influential Métis leader Cuthbert Grant was awarded a large tract of HBC land on the White Horse Plain, and induced many of his Pembina friends and family members to relocate there with him. "Grantown" was enhanced as a potential new home by Provencher's decision to revive the St. François Xavier mission there. However, many freemen and Métis involved in the exodus from Pembina elected to take up new lands in the vicinity of the bishop's residence at St. Boniface, which further stimulated southward extension of river-lot settlement toward the La Salle. The Pembina emigrants joined the *Canadiens*, Métis, de Meurons, and Swiss already living near the Forks.

Having languished earlier in the shadow of Pembina, the St. Boniface mission finally began to flourish. In 1821, Provencher wrote that his and Dumoulin's efforts led to more colonization activity in two years than Lord Selkirk had accomplished after ten years of costly effort. In 1824, Provencher announced that the Church would lease substantial portions of the St. Boniface mission estate to those who wished to live near the church on 100 acre lots, tendered for an annual fee of six dollars. Even a serious natural disaster like the 1826 flood could not lastingly tarnish St. Boniface's lustre.

However, the flood destroyed most colony buildings, and severely damaged Provencher's St. Boniface mission church and residence. The ravages of flooding also impelled 240 settlers—including the 1821 contingent of Swiss settlers, as well as the de Meurons—to quit the colony *en bloc*. But the other inhabitants simply returned to their lots and began to rebuild their homes and outbuildings. Population losses were also offset by the continuing influx of discharged, French-speaking Catholic fur trade employees. Some took advantage of the fact that the colony could provide means of employment and a market for the proceeds of their hunting activities.

Thus, most of the elements which shaped St. Boniface's character were in place by the early 1830s. The lots occupied by French Catholic settlers reached from the homes of the Lagimonière family near the Seine's mouth to the La Salle River and beyond. While the economic life of these settlers was dominated by Fort Garry until the 1860s, their community life centred upon the institutions and works of the St. Boniface mission. Not only did the mission serve local Catholics, but it was the headquarters for Catholic missionary efforts whch encompassed the vast area bounded by Rainy Lake and the Rocky Mountains on the east and west respectively, and by the Pembina River in the south and the Mackenzie River Valley in the north.

Early Institutional Life at St. Boniface

The St. Boniface mission grew slowly in a manner which somewhat belied the geographic extent of its influence in the Northwest. Notwithstanding Provencher's title as the region's bishop, he encountered difficulty in maintaining a network of missionary priests in the hinterland which could extend his spiritual authority. A replacement for a departing missionary no sooner would arrive in the Northwest than yet another would declare intentions to return to central Canada. However, Bishop Provencher conceived of an educational centre at St. Boniface to train a regionally-indigenous priesthood for his mission field.

Provencher shared this dream with his successor, Alexandre Taché. This dream never was to be attained during the lifetime of either bishop. However, Provencher's rough-hewn mission school eventually evolved into St. Boniface College, which for generations produced a lay and clerical elite for the French-speaking Catholic population. Neither did Provencher neglect institutional education for women, although this essentially extended only to the domestic arts instruction he believed necessary for women to exert a "civilizing" influence upon their husbands. As early as 1823, Provencher hired two *Canadiennes* to teach spinning and weaving to female students enrolled at his mission school. Six years later, he recruited the daughters of Augustin Nolin to teach in the school for young women which he had established. In 1844, women's education was more rigorously institutionalized following the arrival at St. Boniface of the Sisters of Charity—*les soeurs grises*.

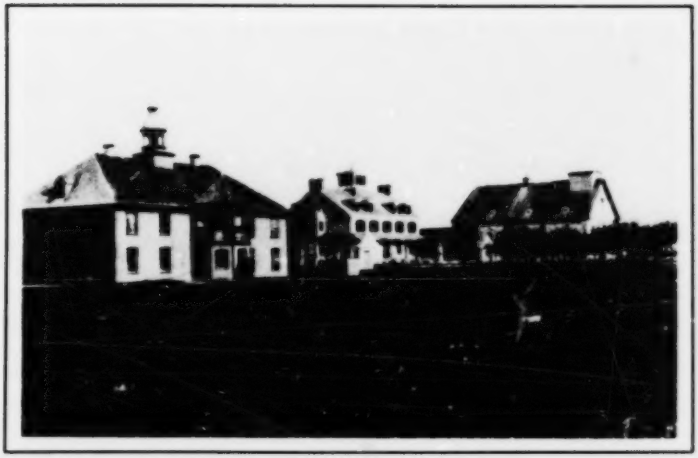
Provencher's redoubtable efforts to develop the St. Boniface mission were buttressed in enduring ways by the arrival during the mid-1840s of four Grey Nuns and two Oblate fathers.

Although the Grey Nuns originally were introduced to Red River Catholics as operators of Provencher's school for young women and as teachers of catechism, they eventually opened convents at St. François Xavier, St. Norbert, St. Vital, and elsewhere. Their first convent still exists in the heart of modern-day St. Boniface, and houses the St. Boniface Museum. This convent served as a nursing home, a hospital and orphanage, and as a residential home. It was the headquarters for the sisters while their local contingent expanded, and initiated a pioneer health care programme which featured home visits. In 1871 the order established the first hospital in the prairie West. Its four-bed infirmary ultimately evolved into the St. Boniface General Hospital, one of Canada's major medical facilities.

One of the two members of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate who arrived in 1845 was Bishop Provencher's successor, Alexandre Taché. Taché and his companion, Father Aubert, represented an order which would dominate Catholic missionary activity in the Northwest for generations to come. Taché was consecrated a bishop in 1851 although he was only 28 years old. He also was designated as Provencher's coadjutor with rights of succession, and was named Bishop of the Northwest when Provencher died in 1853. Taché altered this title to "Bishop of St. Boniface" in honour of the cathedral commissioned by his predecessor in 1832. Provencher's cathedral was the twin-spired stone edifice celebrated in John Greenleaf Whittier's 1859 poem, "The Red River Voyageur." It was destroyed by fire in 1860. Bishop Taché commissioned the work of building a new cathedral in 1862. This structure served the community until 1908, when a new cathedral was opened to worshippers. It, in its turn, was ravaged by fire in 1968, but its outer shell was preserved as part of the present cathedral.

The new twin-towered St. Boniface Basilica, erected behind its predecessor (built in 1863), Taché Hospital, and the Grey Nuns' residence, as they appeared c. 1908.
Courtesy Manitoba Archives

St. Boniface continued to develop as a mission and as a community under Taché's guidance. In 1857, south St. Boniface was partitioned and established as a separate new parish named St. Norbert in honour of Provencher, and a new church was erected there. During the early 1860s, a chapel school was built to serve residents of the area today known as St. Vital. The school was operated by the Grey Nuns, and each week a St. Boniface priest visited to conduct Mass. Meanwhile, St. Boniface College was entrusted to the Oblates, then the Brothers of the Christian Doctrine (in 1854), and once again to the Oblates. Later, the Jesuits took charge of the college.



St. Boniface College, 1878.
Courtesy Manitoba Archives

These religious institutions provided a focus for the development of the complex, predominantly Métis population which continued to grow up around them in St. Boniface. Pioneer St. Boniface inhabitants grew enough on their river lots to support themselves, and rounded out their livelihood by hunting, fishing, and hiring themselves out on contract to the HBC and other colonists. They successfully challenged the Company's fur trade monopoly in 1849. On the eve of Manitoba's creation as a province of Canada in 1870, many of them participated in the Red River Resistance led by Louis Riel.

However, after 1870, many descendants of those settler families who had founded St. Boniface left the Red River Valley. The reasons for their departure from what was by then ancestral land are complex, involving racial discrimination and conflicts concerning Métis land tenure and political rights.

Thereafter, hundreds of new settlers arrived from Quebec and expatriate French-Canadian communities in the United States. Among these newcomers were farmers, merchants, lawyers, journalists, and others who further developed the St. Boniface community. Building on the rich institutional, cultural, and political base bequeathed to them by the Church, the freemen, and the Métis, these new immigrants helped shape St. Boniface's future as a modern urban centre.

Suggestions For Further Reading

A general synthesis of the development of St. Boniface has yet to be written. Lionel Dorge's treatment of Manitoba's French community, *Le Manitoba, reflets d'un passé* (Saint-Boniface: Les Editions du Blé, 1976), is at present the closest approximation to such a work. The standard works dealing with the Red River Settlement allow the reader to place St. Boniface within a larger context in spite of their general emphasis on the fur trade and the Selkirk settlers. These include A.S. Morton's *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2nd edition, 1973); W.L. Morton's *Manitoba, A History* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1969); Gerald Friesen's *The Canadian Prairies, A History* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1984); and Georges Dugas; *Histoire de l'Ouest canadien de 1822 à 1869, Epoque des Troubles* (Montréal, Beauchemin, 1906). The development of the Catholic Church within and beyond the community is best dealt with in the following: A.G. Morice, *A History of the Catholic Church in Western Canada* (Toronto: Musson, 1910); *Lettres de Monseigneur Joseph Norbert Provencher, premier évêque de Saint-Boniface* (St. Boniface, Bulletin de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface, 1913); George Dugas, *Monseigneur Provencher et les missions de la Rivière Rouge* (Montréal, Beauchemin, 1889); Alexandre A. Taché, *Vingt années de missions dans le nord ouest de l'Amérique* (Montréal, Rolland, 1866), and Dom Paul Benoit, *Vie de Mgr Taché, Archeveque de St. Boniface* (Montréal, Beauchemin, 1904). The seminal works on Métis society remain Marcel Giraud's *Le Métis canadien, son rôle dans l'histoire des provinces de l'Ouest* (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1945), translated by George Woodcock as *The Métis in the Canadian West*, 2 vols., (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 1986); and A.-H. de Tremaudan's *Histoire de la nation métisse dans l'Ouest canadien* (Montréal, Lévesque, 1935) which is now available in English as *Hold High Your Heads* (Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1982). Also useful is Margaret A. MacLeod and W.L. Morton's *Cuthbert Grant of Grantown* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1963). The Swiss and de Meurons settlers are discussed in E.H. Bovay, *Le Canada et les Suisses 1604-1974* (Fribourg, Editions Universitaires, Fribourg, Switzerland, 1976). Historic Resources Branch pamphlets dealing with the early stages of the settlement are "Red River Settlement", "Thomas Douglas, Fifth Earl of Selkirk", "Peter Fidler", "Chief Peguis", and "Cuthbert Grant".

Credits

The cover illustration showing a sketch of St. Boniface c. 1880 is printed courtesy of the Manitoba Archives.

ST. BONIFACE

In 1817 Jean-Baptiste Lagimodiere and his wife Marie-Anne Gaboury settled on Seine River lots granted them by Lord Selkirk. They arrived in 1806, the first white couple to settle in the northwest. They became the grandparents of Louis Riel. Near them the same year settled the Des Meurons troops Selkirk had brought from Montreal to oppose the North West Company forces. In 1818-19 Fathers Provencher and Dumoulin established here the first permanent school and mission in the west. Such were the beginnings of St. Boniface, soon to become the centre of French-Canadian life in Western Canada.

The Historic Sites Advisory Board of Manitoba

Two plaques (English and French) are located on the grounds of the former St. Boniface City Hall, 219 Provencher Boulevard, in Winnipeg.